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ABSTRACT

Western Michigan University conducted a survey of high school students' attitudes toward college attendance. A questionnaire was mailed to the Director of Guidance in Michigan high schools with an enrollment of 1,000 or more. In all, 183 questionnaires were mailed and 85 were returned. They emphasized student attitudes toward college attendance and the job market, changes in vocational choice, and expected changes in patterns of college attendance. Results of the survey indicated an increased interest in 2-year trade and vocational programs, and increased awareness of job opportunities, and an expected slight downward enrollment trend in 4-year colleges corresponding to an expected upward enrollment pattern for community colleges. Further details of survey results and tables are included. (MJM)

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SURVEY OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD COLLEGE ATTENDANCE

Office of Institutional Research
Western Michigan University
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December, 1971

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Over the past year it has become increasingly evident that significant changes have occurred in the educational values and goals of prospective college students. Published reports in newspapers and newsmagazines indicate that some occupational fields are over-crowded and that college enrollments are changing. The enrollment picture at Western also indicates some significant shifts in student interest. It seemed essential, therefore, to determine the extent of this change and examine some of the factors that relate to these changes. This is particularly important if we are to plan for and meet the educational needs of students who expect to attend W.M.U.

This study was conducted through the use of a questionnaire sent to high school counselors throughout Michigan. A questionnaire was mailed to the Director of Guidance in high schools with an enrollment of 1,000 or more. In all, 183 questionnaires were mailed and 85 (46%) have been returned. Of those returned, 30% were from southwestern Michigan. The high school counselors were asked to share with us their observations of change, if any, in the attitudes of those students who are about to graduate from high school and either enter the job market or college. We wanted to know what changes have occurred in vocational choice as well as what changes we can expect in patterns of college attendance.

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RESULTS:

The results of the survey are summarized in the accompanying tables. Table 1 shows the areas of reported increased and decreased vocational choice. These data indicate an increased interest in two-year trade and

vocational programs and a decreased interest in education and engineering. However, the degree of shift is not evident in this table but it does become more evident when all data are examined. The nature of this vocational swing is most evident when, in Table 3, we see that more students are questioning the value of a four-year college degree and are planning, if they go to college, to attend a community college first. The change in interest relative to four-year vocationally oriented programs appears to be away from the more traditional, at Western, teacher training and liberal arts programs and toward the health-medical and social service fields.

The causes of these occupational choice changes are examined in Table 2. The most obvious factor in this change is the awareness of students that jobs are available in the medical and technical areas along with the publicity given to the difficulty that current education graduates have in securing employment. In addition, these shifts reflect some changes in values. The current high school students apparently are not only concerned with money and jobs, but they also question the value of a college degree. They want some immediate rewards for their educational effort and are not convinced that a four-year commitment to college will have any pay-off in the end. In general these students are more independent and knowledgeable, but most of all they expect education to prepare them for a specific job and they feel frustrated and disappointed that anticipated jobs may not be available when they graduate.

Table 3 represents an attempt to examine changes in college attendance over the next few years. Item 1 indicates some mixed feeling about future college enrollments. In general, there seems to be a feeling that there will be a slight downward enrollment trend. In looking at Items 2 and 3, we can see that this downward trend is expected primarily in four-year col-

leges and partially corresponds to an expected upward enrollment pattern for community colleges. In addition, there appears to be some tendancy to expect students to defer college for a year or two. The net effect of these factors taken together seems to indicate that four-year colleges and universities can expect slightly lower enrollments for the next two years followed by a possible upswing in the numbers of transfer students provided economic circumstances permit.

The attitudes toward W.M.U. were examined in Items 1 and 2, Table 4. These items were designed primarily to help determine whether or not attendance patterns at Western will be different from those at other colleges. The answer to this latter question (see Item 1) seems to be no; we at Western can expect our attendance to follow the same pattern indicated for other large universities where programs, prestige, and location are the major enrollment determinants.

The extent of attitude change toward the image of W.M.U. was examined in Item 2. The responses to this item indicate that Western has changed status from a small regional college to a large and more complex university. This change is viewed by the respondents as both good and bad. The respondents from southwestern Michigan see this change as negative to neutral and the remainder of the respondents have a generally mixed or neutral reaction. In general, our prestige or image does not seem to have changed, particularly among high schools outside the immediate area. However, in southwestern Michigan we do seem to have suffered some loss of prestige. Of the 26 high schools reporting from this area, 45% noted a negative attitude shift. The cause of this change seems to relate to two or three factors. The first related to our size; we have in the eyes of some become too large, and too

impersonal. And while these two are not necessarily related they seem to frequently go together. The second factor is related to problems associated with minority students. The exact basis for this concern however, is not readily apparent from our data. Finally, some concern was expressed over student behavior and safety. This was not expressed as a major factor, but does seem to describe one cause of prestige loss on a local level.

Probably the most disconcerting factor in examining these data on attitude change toward Western is that only 8% of those responding indicated an improvement in attitude while 52% indicated no change. If we are looking for an improvement in the perception of W.M.U. as a major university, which we are, then this has not yet taken place, at least not in terms of the way we are perceived by guidance directors and probably by students across the state.

In summary this study, conducted with the aid of High School Guidance Directors throughout the state, indicates several things about college attendance in Michigan over the next few years. First, heavy enrollment pressures at four-year institutions is leveling off and may be expected to dip down slightly. Second, enrollments at community colleges can be expected to climb as they have over the past several years and students will be more interested in their terminal programs. Third, students are looking more favorably at trade and technical programs which can be completed in two years or less. Fourth, four-year colleges will find an increased interest among students in medical and social service fields with a corresponding decreased interest in education, engineering, and liberal arts.

TABLE 1

FIELDS OF INCREASED AND DECREASED VOCATIONAL INTEREST FOR STUDENTS ABOUT TO ENTER COLLEGE

Order of Mention

Increased Interest	Decreased Interest
1. Two-year vocational programs	1. Education, teacher training
2. Health professions	2. Engineering, four-year
3. Social service fields (sociology, psychology, social work)	3. Science and math
4. Ecology and conservation	4. Liberal arts and humanities

TABLE 2

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CHANGE IN VOCATIONAL CHOICE

Order of Mention

1. Job opportunity
2. More realistic view of vocations
3. Desire to serve man
4. Teacher surplus
5. Desire for immediate rewards
6. Economic uncertainty

TABLE 3

ATTITUDES TOWARD COLLEGE ATTENDANCE

1. Are fewer students considering college attendance?

   Yes - 59.1%; No - 39.4%; No response - 1.5%

2. Are students deferring college attendance to a later date?

   Yes - 24.2%; Some - 31.8%; No - 33.3%; No response - 7.6%

3. What are the long range estimates of change in attendance at 4-year colleges?

Increase	7.6%
Increase in transfers	10.6%
Decrease	51.5% *
No change	6.1%
No response	13.6%
Other	11.6%

* 62% of this group forecast an increase in community college enrollment.

TABLE 4

ATTITUDES TOWARD W.M.U. & ATTENDANCE AT W.M.U.

1. Are there any attendance changes likely at W.M.U.?

   Up - 13.6%; Down - 31.8%; No change - 34.8%; No response - 19.7%

2. Are there any attitude changes toward W.M.U.?

   TOTAL GROUP:
   Improved - 7.6%; Poorer - 27.2%; No change - 51.5%; No response - 10.6%

   REGIONAL GROUP (southwestern Michigan):
   Improved - 4.5%; Poorer - 45.5%; No change - 45.5%; No response - 4.5%